

'It's a wrap'

By Sam Farr, Member of Congress

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Writing my end-of-year column can be bittersweet. I'm able to look back over the past year and review all that has happened, both on the Central Coast and in Washington, our victories and our defeats.

But today, as I pen this column, I'm in a more forward-looking mood, not because we haven't accomplished much on both coasts, but because there's so much left to do.

I've written recently about some of the frustrations that come with a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. The American people gave Democrats a mandate for change last November, and we have worked our hardest to fulfill your expectations.

In fact, if you look at the House as an isolated unit, we've been colossally successful. In the past 12 months we've voted to end the war (more than once) and have adopted historic levels of funding for domestic priorities ranging from health and education to veterans and social services. We established a strict code of ethics to clean up years of GOP scandals and we are finally fulfilling Congress's role as a White House watchdog.

But of course the House doesn't exist in a bubble. It takes only 41 senators to filibuster a bill, and Republicans have exploited that tactic with gusto--all under the direction of President Bush. On the rare occasions this year when GOP senators broke ranks with the president, he stepped in and vetoed Democratic bills.

That's not to say we didn't have some victories this year. The first increase in the federal minimum wage in almost a decade was enacted in July, although California is already well ahead of that curve. We also signed into law the largest college aid expansion since the GI Bill in 1944. And after years of delay, the president finally agreed to ratify the recommendations of the 9/11 panel.

But what about those Democratic priorities the president struggled to fight? Using either his veto pen or co-opting his subordinates in the Senate, the president fought tooth and nail against health insurance for children, he aggressively opposed an energy bill that would hold oil companies accountable for the enormous profits they made on the backs of consumers, and he refused to accept a responsible patch for the alternative minimum tax.

I hold out hope that some of these issues will be completed before this paper hits the newsstand, but even if they are the president will most likely have gutted many of the most important provisions.

But as I mentioned earlier, I'm intent on looking forward, not backward. And luckily for all of us, I expect a better 2008. Nancy Pelosi recently admitted that she underestimated the vigor with which congressional Republicans would back the president on his war in Iraq. We won't make that mistake again. Republicans know that overwhelming numbers of Americans opposes the occupation of Iraq, and one way or another Democrats will force them to listen to the will of the people.

Republicans this year successfully held domestic spending hostage for more money in Iraq. They freely admitted this, saying that no deal on domestic spending would happen until Democrats agreed to give Republicans many more billions of dollars in unconditional spending in Iraq. But how long can they keep this up? How long until rank-and-file Republicans realize the end result of this strategy?

My dearest wish for 2008 is that the GOP will remember how to negotiate. Many of the bills we debated this year had broad bipartisan support, but my more reasonable Republican colleagues were unable to convince enough of their compatriots to break away from the president. With elections looming, I hope that tide will turn.

We must end the war in Iraq and work to improve our wounded image abroad. We must provide funds for programs that were gutted under 12 years of GOP rule. And we must advocate for programs that will help children and families on the Central Coast and around the country. All of these actions are possible, but they all require cooperation, not separation.

I look forward to beginning the year in Washington with renewed energy. I'm leading the Democratic charge on so many issues central to our communities, from ocean conservation to agricultural support to ending the war in Iraq.

I want to thank everyone who has visited my offices in Salinas, Santa Cruz and Washington this year and everyone who has called or written a letter or e-mail. Please keep your ideas and enthusiasm coming, and I wish each of you a very happy holiday season.